

OBSERVATIONS ON A TONGAN NOSE-FLUTE (FANGUFANGU)

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Abstract. An inscribed nose-flute from Tonga is analysed for its cultural content by translating the text written on the flute and attempting to interpret the drawings. Provenance and cultural context are confirmed by contemporary ethnographic evidence.

This short paper is an attempt to offer an interpretation of some cultural features associated with a Tongan bamboo nose-flute (*fangufangu*) in the collections of the Auckland Museum. The nose-flute originates from the island of Vava'u (Fig 1.), one of the northerly group of islands in the Kingdom of Tonga.

In all probability, this nose-flute, made before 1878, originally came from the westernmost part of 'Uta Vava'u or mainland Vava'u as suggested by the written text on the flute. It tells a story about the types of fishing (*toutai*) usually practised in the only lake in Vava'u but also carried out in the adjoining bay or sea in the same district (Fig. 1). It depicts the varieties of fish plentiful both in the lake and in the adjoining sea. Such fishing was a subsistence activity, or more appropriately, a social and economic enterprise. It is implicit in the text that there existed a particular skill (*poto*) and specific knowledge (*'ilo*) acquired by people in this activity, and that this was learned as people interacted with their environment and with others.

The nose-flute is made of bamboo sawn off at the joints (Fig. 2). The overall length is 31 cm while the inner or hollow part only is 29.5 cm. The diameter of one end of the flute is 3 cm while the diameter of the other end is 3.5 cm. The outer diameter of the drilled holes averages 1.25 cm and the inner diameter, 1 cm. Intervals between each of the five holes drilled in a line on one side of the segment average 6.5 cm (Fig. 3). The middle or centre hole continues right through to the other side of the bamboo. These are the holes that produce the *fangufangu* musical scales. The distance between the five holes should be equally spaced to produce a high quality of sound. Hence, a range of practical skills are required for the production of nose-flutes that produce sound with the best musical effect.

I shall now look at the hot-poker-work, both writing and drawing, inscribed on the flute. The following is a direct copy of the writing as it appears on the bamboo segment:



Fig. 1. Map of Vava'u, Tonga, showing the lake at the western end.

“KOBATIMIENAOKUTUUIHE KOTUNA
T AUMUAMUAOBOBAOKOEAMA
TUNAKOETAOENAKUOTUUIHE
IKAKOEIKAIHEANOVAIVAVA KOEBOKOFU
KOAKOE
 KOEFAI”

The following text in modern Tongan is inferred from the original one, with additions (in brackets) to complete it. This transcription, which accompanies the catalogue entry, was written by Latu Jone c. 1898. An English translation is given underneath.

“Ko Patimi ‘ena ‘oku tu’u ‘i he taumu’a ‘o (3) popao ko (‘ene)
There is Patimi who is standing at the bow of the canoe night-fishing
ama tuna (.) Ko e tao ‘ena ‘oku(kuo) tu’u ‘i he ika (.) Ko e ika
eel. The spear has hit the fish. They are the fish
‘o e anovai (‘i) Vava(u’) (.) Ko e ... (pokofu, tuna, mo e fai.)”
in the lake in Vava’u. They are pokofu, tuna, and fai.

Latu Jone (Latu Sione).

For cultural reasons, this image has been removed.
Please contact Auckland Museum for more information.

Fig. 2. Tongan nose flute (No. 11677) received in Auckland Museum in 1878 as a gift from Mr Parsons. Upper side shown with drawing, lower side with the text.

Photo: University of Auckland

It appears that the original text is complete for this is explicit in the attempted Tongan transcription. The complete translation tells of a man named Patimi, who was probably an expert fisherman in one of the adjoining villages. The fishing, which was night fishing of eel (*ama tuna*), was done in a canoe (*popao*). The text tells how Patimi used the spear (*tao*), for fishing. Patimi died in 1943 aged over 100 years according to a note made by Dr. T. D. C. Childs in the Museum catalogue.

It seems that the discontinuity in the text itself, especially the writing, was for the artist, Latu Sione, a problem of space. This is best illustrated towards the last part of the text, namely, 'VAVA...KOA...KOE'. The word VAVA, in all probability stands for Vava'u, was left incomplete because space was limited by the burning flame (*ulo*) of the torch (*fo'iama*). The names of the varieties of fish could not therefore be made to follow immediately after the word, KOE (Ko e), for example, *Ko e pokofu, tuna, mo e fai*. This problem of space has led the artist to actually place the corresponding names under each fish, in spaces available. It is interesting to note how the problem of space has led to actually resolving the problem of identification, that is, each fish can now be easily recognised because the artist had assigned them their respective names.

It follows that there was a discontinuity in writing and a continuity in drawing in terms of the artistic expression found in the text. Drawing was probably more convincing to the artist as a form of expression than was writing. In terms of the intensity of the artistic expression, the artist was prepared to sacrifice writing for drawing.

The analysis must not be done in isolation from a relevant social setting. It is therefore implicit that the flute text must reflect some social, economic, and cultural aspects of the three adjoining villages Tu'anuku, Longomapu, and Nga'akau (now Tefisi) surrounding the lake and beside the sea. Two considerations are made here. One, that *pokofu* (kind of a fish), *tuna* (eel) and *mohi* (lobster-like sea animal) have always been plentiful and are still in great abundance in the lake. *Fai* (skate, ray), of which two were also engraved on the flute are not now found in the lake. *Fai* are plentiful in that dead part of the sea which is bay-like in nature facing but very

close to Nga'akau. In this part of the sea, there are two tide pools (*fo'i loto*) named Kelepulu and Tavalau which are both surrounded by thick mangroves (*tongo*). These are the common breeding grounds for fish including *fai* and it is very likely that this adjoining sea has always been frequented by the fishermen of these adjoining villages.

According to informants, *ama tuna* (eel fishing) was men's work whereas *tau pokofu* (*pokofu* line fishing) was women's work. The former was done at night and the latter in day-time. It is said that *pokofu* were fished by young women in the day, largely as a leisure activity, that is, it performed less an economic than a social function. While fishing, the young women (*finemui*) in the group had their daily wash and bath.

Another significant social feature worth discussing here is the seating order on the canoe figured on the flute (Fig. 2). This reflects certain skills and specific knowledge developed in relation to people's actual interaction with their environment and with other people in society. For example, at the rear (*taumui* or *taumuli*) of the canoe is the steersman (*taha 'alomui*), in front is the paddler (*taha 'alomu'a*), next the direction giver (*taha taulama*) who is probably an expert in locating schools of fish and fishing spots, but if not this specialist, then, it could have been a casual visitor or observer, a learner or even a fish killer and collector. Finally in the bow is the experienced spearman (*taha ama*).

In fact, there is no hardfast order of seating but that described here is the usual seating arrangement in most situations of the kind of night fishing (*ama vaka*) that is carried out in a canoe. The smallest number of people who can adequately perform this kind of night fishing are two persons, who would in this case be the steersman and the spearman. More people can participate in this particular kind of *ama* depending on circumstances such as the size of the canoe and availability and willingness of the parties involved.

The positions of steersman and spearman are usually filled by old men. Such persons only are considered to have gained sufficient skills and knowledge in the protracted time they have spent in the world, and in their interaction with their environment and people. Such senior persons are believed to have command of the skills and knowledge relating to particular enterprises in society. Thus, seniority and authority as significant aspects of Tongan society are reflected in this socio-economic enterprise.

The head-wrapping shown to have been worn by the steersman and the spearman is variously called *ao*, an archaic word meaning hat, or *pulou* or *fa'ufa'u*. Head wrapping goes with the belief, that was and is still popularly held, that if the head is properly wrapped up in barkcloth, cloth or hat, then one is able to avoid becoming ill from the cold night or becoming over-heated during the day's work. It is the old people who seriously take this precaution, and this is the case with the steersman and the spearman who are supposed to be old people themselves. In fact, today, younger men rarely take this precaution.

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